

Prayer Fellowship

by

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CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE

SAINT LOUIS 18, MISSOURI

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

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PRAYER FELLOWSHIP

Exegetically and Dogmatically Considered

Published by resolution of the Conference of Visitors and Delegates of the Western District of the Ev. Luth. Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, meeting at St. Louis, September 25, 1945

Christian fellowship is a relation among certain human beings who have been brought into a certain relationship to God. We do not enter into it by an act of our will or resolution, certainly not by a synodical set of "Whereas's" and "Be it resolved's." We entered into it when we became Christians. Every believer in Christ is our brother.

One of the means by which this fellowship finds legitimate expression is prayer. For the texts¹⁾ which either command or presuppose acts of common devotion and worship see *Toward Lutheran Union*, p. 169 f. The conclusion is there reached that "prayer fellowship is incumbent upon Christians, also in the visible membership of corporate bodies, on the basis of Scriptural command and precept, when all conditions of the existence of an actual spiritual unity are satisfied, namely, a common supplication or petition to God, in common worship, on the basis of a common purpose."

Analysis of Texts Quoted Against Prayer Fellowship

The question basic to the current discussion of prayer fellowship is whether the Scriptures forbid our praying jointly with those who cannot be denied the name Christian, but who are not synodically affiliated with us or who teach error in one point or another concerning which they are willing to discuss with us the Scriptural basis of their teaching and of our own.

1) Ps. 26:12; Ps. 34:3; Ps. 35:18; Ps. 42:4; Ps. 55:14; Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:17 f.; Acts 16:25; Dan. 2:18; Acts 4:24, 31; 12:12; 13:3; 20:36; Matt. 18:19; John 16:23-26; Rom. 15:6; 1 Tim. 2:1 ff.; Acts 1:14; 2:42.

None of the passages usually quoted against opening meetings with joint prayer, for instance with the representatives of the American Lutheran Church, even distantly refer to such a situation.

Rom. 16:17 deals with enemies of the truth who come with the sinister purpose of deceiving innocent hearers, the simple-minded Christians, by means of "specious talking and pretty words." A text warning against them certainly cannot be applied to those who are not bringing in false doctrine and offense, but are coming with the intention of *eliminating* what is contrary to sound doctrine. The command not to have fellowship certainly applies to all and every kind of errors consistently defended; but not every joint prayer is a token of fellowship; least of all when others come to us frankly admitting a difference in doctrine by announcing their readiness to argue the matter on Biblical grounds. We cannot identify such with the enemies of Christ, Rom. 16:18, who by deceitful tactics are trying to undermine and frustrate the Christian message.

2 Cor. 6:14 ff. The plain words of this passage are directed against fellowship with infidels, idolaters, and men of notoriously wicked life, sons of Belial. See also chapter seven, verse one.

Gal. 1:6 ff. This passage refers to apostles of a gospel which subverted the very foundation of the doctrine of grace and of justification through faith.

1 Tim. 6:3 ff. is a warning against teachers who are introducing a substitute for the Christian Gospel, generally understood as directed against Jewish gnosticism, a combination of Jewish fables and heathen philosophy.

Titus 1:10 ff. As in the similar passage 2 Tim. 2:14 ff. most likely the Jewish gnostics are here referred to. These opponents are "defiled and unbe-

lieving," certainly persons who can no longer be regarded as Christians.

Titus 3:10 f. Luther describes the heretic here mentioned as "one who determinately and knowingly desires to remain damned in error" (St. Louis, XVI: 2182; quoted with approval by Dr. Walther in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1868, p. 113). Again, in a sermon on Luke 17:11-19 (St. Louis, XII:1462) Luther says of Titus, 3:10-11: "This sin St. John (1 John 5:16) calls a sin unto death, in regard to which no one should pray. And Christ (Matt. 12:31) calls it a sin against the Holy Ghost, which will not be forgiven either here or there." Again, in his commentary on Exodus 11:1-3 (St. Louis, III:862) Luther regards the self-condemned heretic of Titus 3:11 as "one who is delivered unto Satan." Dr. Walther, following Luther in his understanding of Titus 3:10-11, therefore defines a heretic as a person who, "in spite of repeated admonition and in spite of better knowledge and conscience, continues in his perverse conduct" (*Die ev.-luth. Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden*, 1891, p. 24; also *Kirche und Amt*, p. 126; also Guenther, *Symbolik*, pp. 7-8). The same position is taken by Dr. Pieper in his *Christliche Dogmatik*, I, p. 101. The text cannot possibly be quoted against a relationship to those who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions, who are recognized as Christians (since we do not proselytize their members), but who by tradition or weakness err in some point of doctrine. Such are certainly not the enemies of the truth envisaged by Paul in his Letters or by our Lord in His warning against "false prophets," Matt. 7:15.²⁾

2) A member of the conference drew attention to the passage 2 John:7-11 as a text sometimes quoted against fellowship of erring Christians, while the verses plainly refer to anti-christs, deceivers, who deny the Incarnation.

Relation to Erring Christians

While we have no exact parallel in Scripture to the intersynodical relationships of 1945, there is a passage in 1 Corinthians which acknowledges the existence of teachers who err in one point or another without thereby ceasing to be Christians. The passage is 1 Cor. 3:10-15. Here are people who have in their doctrine gold, silver, and precious stones, that is, the fundamental truth of the Gospel, but they are also building "wood, hay, and stubble"—doctrines not founded in the Scriptures, but contrary to sound teaching, not of such a nature, however, as to destroy saving faith. Quoting this text, the Apology (*Triglotta*, p. 233) says: "There are also many weak persons, who build upon the foundation stubble that will perish, *i. e.*, certain unprofitable opinions (some human thoughts and opinions), which, nevertheless, because they do not overthrow the foundation, are both forgiven them and also corrected. And the writings of the holy Fathers testify that sometimes even they built stubble upon the foundation, but that this did not overthrow their faith." Similarly Luther: "This cannot be understood of heretics. For these latter lay another foundation, while the former (teachers of 'wood-, hay-, stubble-doctrines') remain on the foundation, *i. e.*, in faith in Christ, are saved, and are called saints of God, their hay, straw, wood, notwithstanding" (St. Louis, XVI:218). In accord with these are Walther, *Lutheraner*, V, 1, pp. 83-84; *Die ev.-luth. Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden*, 1891, p. 28; Rev. Zorn, *Lutheraner*, 1924, p. 247 ("wrong and worthless doctrines of men which oppose the Word of God"). Now, it is significant that Paul does not hurl such names as "false teachers" (*pseudodidaskaloi*), "false prophets" (*pseudoprophetai*), etc., at the teachers of such doctrines, but rather considers them to be builders, albeit builders with poor judg-

ment as to building materials for the structure that is to be reared on the foundation. No one who has learned the mind of Paul will suspect him of a weakness here, as if he condoned the false teaching which was mixed with the true in this message. But while he warns all teachers earnestly against the use of unsubstantial and inflammable building materials, he does not urge severance of all religious fellowship with such as employ "wood, hay, and stubble," but rather urges maintenance and continuance of Christian fellowship in order to prevent a rupture of the unity of the universal church (1 Cor. 1:10, 13; 12:13). Our conclusion of this brief study may be summed up in a caution against applying to Christians who differ from us in doctrine or practice passages which refer only to reprobates, anti-Christian errorists, heretics, enemies of Christ.

In view of the importance which has been attached to the idea of prayer fellowship it is not amiss that we give renewed study to the passages quoted in this connection, as suggested by our resolution of 1935 (*Proceedings*, p. 293) "that the pastoral conferences throughout Synod earnestly and diligently study the Scripture passages pertinent to the question of prayer fellowship." The first result of such a study will be the realization that neither the texts nor the contexts in which they stand have anything to do with prayer fellowship. In fact, not a single one of them refers to prayer at all. And while it is true that a fair, reasonable inference from a passage of Scripture is valid in establishing doctrine and practice, a caution regarding such inferences has been sounded in *Toward Lutheran Union*, p. 43 ff., in view of the errors which can slip in when an inference contains too many steps before it reaches the point at issue. It is a remarkable thing that the Bible nowhere in so many words condemns prayer spoken in Christian trust to the true

God. Yet it is such prayer that is denounced as unionism by some who believe, although mistakenly, that they represent the historic position of our Church. As a matter of fact, there is nothing in the writings of Luther and of the dogmaticians, so far as known to us, nor in the writings of Dr. Walther, nor in the writings of Dr. Pieper that has any direct reference to the matter under discussion.

Prayer Not Essentially a Confessional Act

None of these theologians ever held that prayer in itself constitutes a fellowship or that prayer in itself is a confessional act in the sense that it is by its very nature an expression of agreement in doctrine. Here is another serious begging of the question. Without a single Bible passage available for proof it is asserted that prayer is always a confessional act, that joint prayer with Christians of other denominations is in itself an acknowledgment of their error. It is a remarkable thing that no such definition of prayer as a confession of doctrine to or before men is found in our confessional writings nor in Dr. Pieper's discussion of the nature and function of prayer nor in our Synodical Catechism. There is in existence no definition of prayer that includes confession as a mark. We are not now denying that the occasion may make it so or that confession of doctrine may be part of a prayer. The point is that confession of faith to others and acknowledgment of their agreement with us is never an essential and inherent part, an unavoidable concomitant, of prayer. Though spoken in unison, the prayer is still communion of the individual participants with God, and must be defined as such. Certainly, prayer may be a unionistic act, not inherently, but by reason of the circumstances under which the act of prayer fellowship takes place and which carry these implications into the act. If such

prayer is understood as originating from a sense of unity in the dogmatic system professed, it is, of course, rank hypocrisy, unless such unity exists. But the mistake that has been made is the assumption that by joint prayer we actually place a public stamp of approval on all those who are associated with us in any part of the program or service.

Prayer Fellowship as Distinguished from Altar and Pulpit Fellowship

There is a difference between prayer fellowship on the one hand and altar and pulpit fellowship on the other hand. This has been dealt with with great fullness in *Toward Lutheran Union*, chapters 7—11. The essence of pulpit fellowship is mutual exchange of pulpits as an expression of unity, hence an act of doctrinal indifference if *those* exchange pulpits who are not in agreement in confession. Still, not every appearance in the pulpit of another constitutes an acknowledgment of fellowship. It all depends on the announced purpose of the meeting. It depends on the understanding which exists as to difference in doctrine. When a General Council church in St. Louis had a vacancy in the early twenties, they applied to Dr. Pieper for someone to conduct services, and he asked me to take over. I said: "I suppose I will have to make sure and voice my disagreement with General Council practices." Dr. Pieper answered: "Oh, not at all, those people know exactly where we stand." Then I found that he had been often an intermediary when the church had vacancies, which occurred quite often, and he would then send a student or a colleague to help the people out. You may remember that a year or two ago we brought a similar story, indeed the exact counterpart, from the reminiscences of Rev. Friedrich, in the *Lutheran Witness*, showing that the attitude of Dr. Walther was precisely the same.

Altar fellowship must always be defined as confessional fellowship, since Paul refers to the Sacrament as constituting a "communion," 1 Cor. 10:16 ff. Those who commune together thereby indicate that they are of the same personal conviction in the matter of Scriptural teaching. I am not introducing here the denominational angle except to say that indifference to the doctrine professed in the act of altar fellowship is the one essential "*unionism*" to which we have reference in church history.³⁾

Joint Worship in the Gospels and in Acts

The New Testament was written before the present relationship of Christian bodies agreeing in the fundamentals (including the Catholic Church, see *Triglotta*, p. 460) but differing in other doctrines, yet existing side by side. In other words, the burden of proof rests on those who pronounce sinful a certain act of participation of certain bodies or their representatives. It would certainly have to be demonstrated that such participants were actually representatives of their bodies and were present in a confessional capacity. But let us turn to the situation as it existed in the time of our Lord and His Apostles. It is very evident that the spiritual leadership of Israel had fallen into the hands of those who were still sitting in the seat of Moses (Matt. 23:2) but were enemies of the truth proclaimed by Jesus Christ regarding his own deity and the necessity of faith in Him as a condition of salvation. We are reminded that concerning them Jesus says, "Ye have not His Word abiding in you; for whom He hath sent, Him ye believe not. . . . Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye

3) For this reason we have limited in *Toward Lutheran Union* the discussion of "*unionism*" to the relations between confessional groups.

trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed Me; for he wrote of Me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe My words?" (John 5:38, 45-47.) Yet Jesus taught in the synagogues, where the service was conducted according to a very strict ritual. Dr. Edersheim has given the details in the first volume of his *Life and Times of Jesus*, chapter 10. There never was a service that did not contain a selection from the prescribed prayers. Edersheim gives the complete text. It was only after the public prayers had closed with an *Amen*, spoken by the congregation, that the reading of the Law began. In this act never fewer than seven persons took part, each reading a few verses.⁴⁾ Next followed the reading of the Prophets. Then came the address, discourse, or sermon, that is, where a rabbi or a distinguished stranger was present. Let us take note that under these conditions Jesus worshiped with His people in the synagogue. Did our Lord thereby identify Himself with the false religious views held by the great mass of rabbis and scribes?

Concerning the worship of the Apostles and their relation to the synagogue services we have a large amount of data supplied by the Book of Acts. In the *Australasian Theological Review* for March, 1945, the Rev. P. O. Pahl contributes an article on this subject, from which I quote:

"From many incidental references in the earlier chapters of the Acts of the Apostles it is evident that at first there was no distinct break or separation between the Jewish Church and the newly established Christian Church. The members of the mother church at Jerusalem who were Jews continued to

4) This ritual was followed so strictly that Edersheim maintains that even to the present day we are able to tell which of those today reading the Law in the synagogues are descendants of Aaron and which are Levites.

live as Jews even after their conversion to Christianity. As Jews they lived in accordance with the Law and observed the ordinances of Jewish worship. Of the three thousand converted on the day of Pentecost we are told that they continued 'daily with one accord in the Temple' and broke bread from house to house (Acts 2:46). These believers visited the Temple daily, obviously to participate in the Temple worship, but they also had their private gatherings in their own homes. At first, then, there was no strict division between Jews and Christians, Temple (synagog), and church. When we read that 'Peter and John went up together into the Temple at the hour of prayer' (Acts 3:1), we must draw a similar conclusion. Peter and John and the other believers continued to observe the ordinances of Jewish worship even after Pentecost, and this state of affairs continued for many years. . . . It would be wrong to infer that the early Christians at Jerusalem visited the Temple for the sole purpose of bearing witness to Jesus Christ. They certainly did this in the precincts of the Temple, but they certainly also observed the ordinances of Jewish worship. Twenty or more years later we still find St. Paul worshiping in the Temple at Jerusalem (Acts 22:17). . . . Peter at Joppa observes the regular hours of Jewish prayer (Acts 10:9). The Christians in other parts also remained connected with the synagog. Paul, in speaking of his conversion to the multitude at Jerusalem, recounts how he told the Lord that it was known that he 'imprisoned and beat in every synagog them that believed' in Him (Acts 22:19). (Compare also Acts 26:11; 9:1 and 2.) From all this we may infer that the early Christians (almost exclusively Jews) still frequented the synagogs, and the most likely place in which to find Christians anywhere was in the synagog. . . . All these definite statements of facts and incidental references make it

quite evident that for many years the Church was predominantly Jewish as far as membership was concerned and that the early Christians continued to live as Jews and to pay strict attention to all the ceremonial regulations of the Law."

Separatism Foreign to the New Testament

One searches in vain to find a passage in Scripture which makes absolute agreement in sound doctrine the condition of a God-pleasing common prayer. The New Testament has many clear statements⁵⁾ rendering beyond question the will of God that His Word be accepted as the truth in all its parts. See *Toward Lutheran Union*, chapter 6. There are also, as we have seen, passages in great number which either command or presuppose common, or joint, prayer. Praying on occasions or under conditions which imply indifference to doctrine and toleration of error is certainly contrary to all those texts which stress the duty of confessing Christ and His truth. But that all joint prayer with such as have an imperfect understanding of the truth or actually maintain false views is sinful, for this we have no Scripture. Are we going to forget the false views entertained by the disciples concerning the Kingdom of God and the universality of grace, errors which colored so many of their questions even up to Ascension Day? Yet it was these disciples that the Savior taught to pray, "Our Father, etc.

The urge to divide, separate, and pull apart is foreign to all the Epistles. Paul had occasion to remind the Corinthians and others of the divisions which existed among them. The party spirit of the Corin-

5) Rom. 16:17; 2 Thess. 3:6; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16; 3:5; 4:15; Titus 3:9-12; 2 John 10 f.; 1 John 4:1; 6; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 Tim. 1:18 f.; 2 Tim. 1:13.

thians has become a commonplace. Paul reverts twice to the subject in the same letter. But the faithful among the Corinthians were not told to separate from the adherents of Peter, of Paul, of Apollos, or Christ; rather the Corinthians are rebuked for their disunity, and Paul calls upon them to be one in the Spirit. Even so we find no warnings uttered against fellowshiping Apollos, although it is clear that he held an imperfect view concerning Baptism (Acts 18:25); instead, he was instructed by some faithful members. Read the record, and try to imagine Aquila and Priscilla refusing to pray with Apollos until he had become sound in his theology.

Essence and Accident

The difference between joint prayer and prayer fellowship is fundamental. I quote from our faculty opinion of May 15, 1941: "Nevertheless, we cannot say that under all and any circumstance a *joint* prayer with one not in confessional agreement with us is prayer *fellowship*. An act must always be judged in the light of its attending circumstances. Offering a prayer, for instance, at the table of a non-Lutheran or uniting in a table prayer under such circumstances is not necessarily of a confessional character and cannot therefore from the outset be condemned as forbidden prayer *fellowship*. Even so circumstances under which a group meets for the purpose of discussing their doctrinal differences on the basis of Scripture, in order to arrive at a doctrinal agreement, may be such that a joint prayer for the Spirit's guidance cannot be condemned as forbidden prayer fellowship. Such concrete cases belong into the field of casuistry." See also Saginaw resolutions, *Proceedings*, 1944, p. 251 f.

This element of casuistry is not referred to merely as a way of escaping responsibility. The difficulty is

a real one. While in the midst of a public controversy with some false prophet it may be shocking to Christian sentiment to appear jointly with him on a program — baccalaureate service, civic victory celebration, etc. — where it is indeed quite evident that by my appearance on this platform I am *not* giving the impression of treating error as indifferent. Still it may be offensive. Or let us say that a liberal United Lutheran Church Secretary of Missions has locally advertised his readiness to accept lodge members, and I am asked to appear with him on some occasion which has no confessional implications. There may be other occasions which make our appearance with others indeed offensive in the sense that our good members would interpret such an act as one of indifference to unscriptural teaching and ungodly practice. To say that it is impossible sometimes to draw an exact line is really the essence of the idea of casuistry. But in most cases we shall be able to take sure steps by remembering that an organization, a meeting, an occasion, is identified as to its essence by its purpose and that all else is accidental. When organizations like the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross, or, let us say, the American Congress, or the Court of Law taking an oath, treat all religions on an equal basis, this would be proof of indifferentism only when it demanded of its *members* or *participants*, as a condition of membership or participation, that *they* view all religions there represented as equally commendable by the standard of truth. Precisely this does not happen.

This concerns even our support of certain religious institutions. We have always fostered the support of the National Christian Association. We have recognized that, though made up of Reformed churchmen, the purpose of the association is one that we can

approve, that is, the fight against the lodge evil. Lately a number of our synodical Districts officially approved of the Gideons. Now, the Gideons have a custom which we cannot approve. When they have their conventions, they make it a point to conduct services in all the Protestant churches. But they are not organized for this purpose. They are organized to distribute Bibles. Both our clergy and laity recognize the distinction. The American Bible Society has been officially received from the floor of the Missouri Synod and quite a number of Districts. Now, the Bible Society announces officially, "We work for Christians of all kinds of denominations and confessions, and Christians of all languages, and it is a real form of collaboration." But we know that the Bible Society is neutral towards denominations as the Postal Department is neutral or the Wabash Railroad or Route 66 are neutral. However, the *purpose* of the society we approve. From that it derives its being and essence. By contrast, consider the unionistic project or service. The union Good Friday services are designed to exhibit the common discipleship of all participating denominations, and this applies to the union Sunday evening services during the summer and to the union revival services. Here the service itself is the expression of a common purpose, is designed to express religious unity which—and this is the point—does not exist. It makes a difference whether a newspaper treats all churches alike on its religious page, being "neutral" to all in this sense, or whether it demands of its employees that they subscribe to a religious creed of indifferentism, as is done in the Masonic order. Whether it is an organization or an occasion, the purpose defines its essence, and where there is not a purpose to make a meeting expressive of a common religious sentiment and of Christian discipleship, we cannot speak of unionism

in the proper sense of the term, nor can participation be condemned as unscriptural. The question of offense will be discussed in a later section.

Dr. Fritz' "Pastoral Theology"

I have no difficulty in harmonizing the principles here set forth with the definitions and judgments concerning unionism contained in the *Pastoral Theology* by Dr. John H. C. Fritz. I hold these principles to be sound and Scriptural today as I did thirty years ago when leading men in our Church advocated and began to practice a policy which treated the differences between our Synod and the older (Eastern) Lutheran bodies as non-divisive of fellowship. Let us take note of the fact that the texts quoted by Dr. Fritz are the same passages which have already been analyzed in this paper. They warn against fellowship with wolves who come in sheep's clothing, who advocate the error of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who bring in divisions and offenses, who try to deceive the believers with error, who endeavor to make us partakers of their evil deeds, who pervert the Gospel of Christ, who teach doctrines of devils. Accordingly, in his paragraphs Dr. Fritz describes the false teachers as those who ask us to ignore doctrinal differences, to agree to disagree, to give various and varying opinions a place in the same church body, approve sectarianism, deny the authority of the Bible, accept the principle "deeds, not creeds," unite believers and unbelievers in the same church body," emphasize the social gospel, to deny and not to confess the truth.

In the "Practical Applications" the author is certainly not setting up human authority alongside of Scripture, but assumes that Scripture and sound principle will in every case decide whether a service, program, or meeting falls under the head of sinful unionism.

Inconsistency of the Separatist Position

As a matter of fact, we have never in practice made any consistent application of the theory that joint prayer is permissible only when there is agreement in the faith and profession among those who meet together. A strict application of this principle would mean that we could never, during the past thirty years, have opened a meeting with representatives of the Wisconsin Synod with prayer. We have now for almost a generation acknowledged sharp differences in the doctrine of the ministry and the Church. In official papers the theory has been set forth that "days" in Genesis may signify "periods." Chaplaincies have been condemned as a violation of the separation of Church and State, as unionistic, as a denial of the doctrine of the call. Boy Scouts have been condemned as deistic and unionistic. It has been maintained by way of explanation for our continuation of joint prayer: These are our brethren, and before we break with them, we continue to pray with them. But aside from the mechanical use of the term "brethren," where is the Scriptural basis for this modification of what is regarded as a Biblical principle? Are synods, then, of divine authority?

A distinction may indeed be made between meeting those who come to defend their false position and those who come with a willingness to be instructed and with the assurance that there is an "open mind." However, this distinction certainly condemns the practice of joint prayer at meetings with Wisconsin Synod representatives. For the past thirty years they have met us invariably with the intention of defending their position that our distinction of Synod and congregation (as being by human and divine right respectively) is unscriptural, and that the pastoral office cannot be termed a unique divine institution. For that matter, we should have to refuse opening

prayers also in the meeting of our own conferences. We still have those among us who differ on the marriage of the wife's sister, on war and pacifism, on bazaars, the dance, the communing of lodge men. We have those who declare the acceptance of children of heterodox parents in our schools as sinful unionism. One pastoral conference asks the St. Louis faculty to eliminate from future printings of the Smalcald Articles those paragraphs which contain "false teaching regarding separation of Church and State." We have had not so long ago resolutions of conferences voicing complete disagreement with Dr. Bente's article on life insurance. Not only do our men differ on these and other points, but they sometimes meet for the purpose, not of learning, but of defending their position.

The Historic Position of Our Church

Sufficient proof has been submitted in recent articles in the *Lutheran Witness* to show that the old synodical position was not opposed to joining in prayer with those who differ with us doctrinally but who show a readiness to accept the decision of the Word of God. Dr. Walther has stated the matter well in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1868, pp. 110, 111:

"We are far from desiring to discontinue fraternal fellowship with an individual person or church fellowship with a church body if these are not dogmatically correct in their Christian knowledge. By no means do we regard such correctness as a condition of such fellowship. If we would do that, we would have to contend against ourselves; for while we note such faults, *i. e.*, errors, in others, they again may note such in the one or the other among us. We know that there are errors of weakness and that a Christian may carry about in his mind even a fundamental error without overthrowing the foundation in his heart, let alone that a person erring with respect to a non-fundamental point would necessarily reject the foundation of faith."

This is the position taken by our confessional writings. In the Augsburg Confession (Art. VII, par. 2; *Triglotta*, p. 47) it is stated, on the basis of Eph. 4: 5-6: "And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments." And the Apology (par. 20; *Triglotta*, p. 232, 233) unambiguously defines "the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the Sacraments" as "the foundation" referred to by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:11 ("Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ"), i. e., as "the true knowledge of Christ and faith," and expressly takes doctrinal errors which do not overthrow the foundation into account as matters that "are both forgiven them and also corrected," hence as matters which do not destroy the requisite fundamental unity of the Church spoken of in the Augsburg Confession.

Still quoting from the articles in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1868, we find these judgments relating to the subject under discussion:

"THESES II

"Even an error against the clear Word of God on the part of an individual member of the Church does not at once, and in fact, deprive him of church fellowship, confessional fellowship, or colleagueship" (p. 318).

"Herewith we in no wise wish to say that as soon as any error conflicting with the clear Word of God becomes apparent in any member of the Church, church fellowship with him must be severed. A more horrible (*grauenhaft*) fanaticism, destructive of the very unity of the Church aimed at, could hardly be imagined. For never has the Church attained a higher degree of unity in doctrine than a unity in fundamentals, and only a fanatical chiliast could hope that the Church would ever reach a higher degree. So long as the Church remains in the flesh, this is as im-

possible as that it should become perfect in life and in love. Luther, therefore, writes quite correctly: 'If the saints did not err in matters of faith and truth, why, then, should Peter teach (the Christians) to increase in faith and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18), and Paul teach increase in Christ, in order that we be not tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine like little babes (Eph. 4:12, 14)? As much as we lack of faith, so much there is in us of error and unbelief,' XIX:1381" (l. c., p. 66).

"THESES III

"Even an error conflicting with the Word of God and arising (manifesting itself) in an entire church body does not in itself make such a church body a false Church with which an orthodox Christian or the orthodox Church would have to break off fellowship."

"To concede that every individual true member of the Church may err and at the same time to deny that *the entire true Church* may err would be a disgraceful contradiction of which only a papist would make himself guilty. So long, therefore, as a church body does not *harden itself* in its error (on the meaning of this see Thesis IX and the elucidating quotations), its error, even though it be a grievous one, does not constitute a dividing gulf, least of all if the church body has already entered upon the way leading to agreement in the full truth. Luther, therefore, writes correctly: ". . . In so far as the Church still abides in the flesh, it has sin and may err and be led astray; but because of the Spirit this is forgiven her. . . . Thus all Christendom erred in the beginning in Jerusalem when it attempted to decree that the Gentiles must be circumcised. . . . What is there then that is strange if Christendom afterwards, when it was not so highly endowed with, and rich in, the Spirit, also erred at times and missed the mark, and

yet through forgiveness of sins remained holy, as did the former Christendom?" (*L. c.*, p. 67.)

"As soon as there reveals itself in an individual person or in a church body the *readiness of mind* (attitude, *Gesinnung*) to submit unconditionally to the entire Word of God and to hold nothing that militates against the foundation of the Christian faith — be it the real foundation" (redemption through Christ) "or the dogmatic foundation" (doctrine of justification through faith), "or the organic foundation" (the Scriptures) — "we gladly extend to every such person the hand of fraternal fellowship and are also cordially willing and ready to have church fellowship with such a church body."⁶ This, however, is our attitude and practice, not because we regard any doctrine clearly revealed in the Word of God as an open question, which we are free to affirm or to deny, to decide thus or thus, but because we know that there are *errors* which have their source in *weakness* and that a Christian may carry about in his mind even a fundamental error without overthrowing the foundation in his heart, let alone that a person erring with respect to a non-fundamental point would necessarily reject the foundation of faith. Nevertheless, we regard it as our duty to reprehend, refute, oppose, fight, and censure as error whatever becomes manifest as such in those who desire to be our brethren, whether the error concern a fundamental or a non-fundamental doctrine of the Word of God" (*l. c.*, p. 110 f.).

6) Similarly Professor Guenther, in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1876: "It is much more important that the right spirit rule in an organization than that every doctrine should be presented in the most correct manner. Where, in spite of the correct presentation of the truth, a false spirit rules, there pride, the mother of all heresies, rules; but where the right spirit rules and the right doctrine of justification is in power, there the false doctrine will gradually be consumed."

"THESIS V

"The church militant has, indeed, the duty to strive after absolute unity in faith and doctrine as the goal, but it never attains a higher degree of unity than a unity in fundamentals" (p. 318).

"With respect to the dogmas which do not involve an overthrowing of the means necessary to obtain salvation, all believers may err. . . . Toleration of non-fundamental errors and deficiencies of knowledge is part of the fellowship of love among those who, without division, are joined together in a visible Church" (Hulsemann, quoted by Dr. Walther with approval, l. c., p. 144).

The Later Stages of Controversy

The situation had changed materially through the antagonism created in the Election Controversy. In the later stages of that controversy theologians indeed met for doctrinal discussions, but the contending delegates were there frankly as champions fighting for a cause, and the attitude Dr. Bente took in regard to joint prayer on such occasions must be understood in the light of these attitudes.

The Brux Case

One cannot overlook in this connection the discussion which took place about fifteen years ago in connection with the trial of Missionary Adolph A. Brux on charges brought in connection with the offering of joint prayer with a missionary of the Reformed Church. The synodical decision will be found in the *Proceedings* of 1935, page 293. This decision acknowledged as the correct stand on prayer fellowship the following statement: "Scripture very plainly prohibits compromise of the truth, indifference to doctrine, unionism, and giving of offense, and therefore forbids every kind of prayer fellowship which involves

one of these objectionable features. — There are in the domain of casuistry cases where the question whether unionistic prayer fellowship is involved cannot be answered in advance." After Dr. Brux had accepted this statement the resolution was passed that he be returned to service in the mission field. The 1935 definition places the burden of proof where it belongs, that is, on him who wishes to deny me the privilege of speaking a Christian prayer jointly with one who has been made my brother through faith in the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ when this is done without concession to, or toleration of, error.

The Question of Offense

The Saginaw resolutions refer to the avoidance of offense when opening intersynodical meetings with prayer. Before the vote was taken, explanation was made from the floor to the effect that this is not an absolute law governing future conferences, but always presumes that the person pleading violation of conscience prove that an actual wrong has been committed. The whole question of offense really deserves restudy. Certainly, Scripture does not permit us to pass judgment on a brother on so indefinite a charge as being "offended" by him. We must be able to establish the transgression of a moral principle — the law of love, one of the Ten Commandments, some specific prohibition — if we accuse a brother of wrongdoing. By simply accusing the brother of having given offense, we really take the entire right of judgment into our own hands. We do not use the only standard of judgment among Christians, which is the Word of God, but use as a standard of judgment our own feelings or reactions.

In the Christian Church no one can bring charges or exercise discipline on the mere ground of being "offended." As soon as "offense" is charged, the ques-

tion arises, Has this offense been given, or has it been merely taken? In other words, the first consideration must be, Is the offense taken justifiably, or is the charge based on some arbitrary, human definition of what is sinful? But since in any such case what must be proved is the reality of a just cause for offense, and since this can be proved only by showing that the offending brother has sinned against the Word of God, it is evident that any charge of offense (so far as church discipline is concerned) is only the half-way station. We must in every case come down to the Scripture proof by which the brother is convicted of wrongdoing.

The giving of offense has been charged in instances when intersynodical meetings were opened with prayer, also in connection with religious broadcasts in which the announcer (non-Lutheran) had a prayer or read a hymn or a Scripture passage, also concerning participation in civic meetings under like circumstances. But let us see what is implied by the complaint that "offense" has been given. If such complainants use the word offense in the sense of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, they are saying *in effect*: "We are weak brethren, you have offended us." This, of course, would be an admission that the thing in which consideration is demanded has no ground at all in Scripture, since a weak Christian is one who has inadequate knowledge of Holy Writ or has scruples about things morally or doctrinally indifferent. Accordingly, when pleading offense as understood in Romans, chapter 14, and 1 Corinthians, one making such a plea says in effect, "I object to this because I have an inadequate knowledge of the Word of God" — the obvious answer to this being, "Then don't try to instruct others until you have better knowledge." Or his protest means: "I have scruples about this kind of praying which is really an adiaph-

oron depending upon circumstances under which it may be objectionable" — to which our reply would be that if he knows these things to be morally indifferent, why does he have scruples? And if he admits that only circumstances may make such an act reprehensible, then why does he not prove that the circumstances in this case were such? Or is the term offense used as in Mark 9:42 and Rom. 16:17, in the sense of misleading others into sin by some sinful action? Then certainly the burden of proof rests on those who denounce a Christian prayer as sinful. Or do the protesting brethren use the term offense in the non-Scriptural sense of something that gives us displeasure? The burden of proof again certainly rests on them to show that what gives displeasure is really condemned in Scripture.

We cannot leave this subject without pointing out that *offense* is used in a threefold sense in Scripture. For one thing, the preaching of the Cross is an "offense" to many. But this offense is taken, not given. We are warned against offending these little ones, Matt. 18:6. In this and related passages ("If thy right eye offend thee, etc.") the term refers to becoming a cause that others sin by imitating us. Certainly, one cannot call a Christian prayer an "offense" in this sense. Then there is the offense given in matters of indifference. (Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 10). Would anyone dare to say that prayer is an adiaphoron? Certainly, prayer is among the things commanded, like preaching the Gospel, and can become objectionable only by some *accidens*, as when a Christian prayer is spoken on occasions which imply indifference to the truth and a tolerance of error — and we are back to our 1935 definition. There are simply no texts regarding offense to justify the use of the term in the matter under discussion. Indeed, the accident may be such as to make it an offense in the Biblical sense when we

refuse to pray. Let no one say that, after all, by so refusing, we are bearing witness. A witness is no witness, testimony against error is no testimony, unless it is understood. That is the very essence of testimony, and where our refusal to pray is not understood, but gives the impression of pronouncing judgment on the other party as being outside the ranks of believers, it certainly closes to our testimony regarding fundamental teachings the ears of those whom we have thus offended. We must conclude therefore that also where we refuse to join in prayer on valid Scriptural grounds, we owe the other party and possibly the general public an explanation of our stand. By not doing so, we easily may offend weak disciples in other camps.

Participation in Religious Features of Civic Programs

Since Eckhardt's *Reallexicon* has been adduced in support of a negative attitude regarding all participation in civic programs which are opened with prayer or closed with a benediction, it is of interest to note that the sainted Rev. Eckhardt did not draw the same conclusion from our older literature. A short time before his death he submitted a series of theses to the St. Louis Conference on this subject: "Political Meetings and Prayer Fellowship." I translate his fourth thesis: "One need not keep away from meetings which are opened with prayer. The prayer is an *accidens*, much like the unjust expressions and judgments which one hears without thereby giving consent." "To sit with pastors of other churches on a platform or political meeting would not constitute church fellowship, since we are gathered as citizens." "When a Lutheran pastor, after a political meeting has been opened with prayer by a pastor of another faith, delivers a political speech, this does not constitute church fellowship." "A Lutheran pastor may

decline opening a political meeting with prayer as a violation of the principle of separation of Church and State⁷⁾ and the possibility of offense, but not because the program is concluded by a Methodist with prayer. This would not constitute church fellowship."

The situation which has given rise to the present discussion of prayer fellowship is familiar to most of us. In November, 1944, a program was under discussion sponsored by the mayor of St. Louis and planned in conjunction with representatives from St. Louis churches. Pastor Karl Kurth was chairman of a committee of the St. Louis Pastoral Conference which had been requested to participate. He had made clear to the mayor that the Lutheran pastors of the Missouri Synod could not be represented in a service of worship or of prayer, but that they could participate in a civic gathering. At his request the purpose of the program was defined and the arrangements of the program made to give emphasis to its civic nature. Dr. Caemmerer was to give a five-minute address of a civic nature. The Pastoral Conference ratified the arrangement. The conference felt that it would involve grave misconstructions upon our Church if it were not represented in such a program, either in that our Church would be regarded a unit of the Metropolitan Church Federation, which was to be represented by a white and a colored pastor on the program, or that the Lutherans of the Missouri Synod were not moved by V-E Day when it would arrive. When V-E Day arrived, the program stood as follows: The mayor was to preside. A high school chorus of colored young people was to give several selections. Dr. Caemmerer was to be one of five speakers presenting five-minute addresses. The invocation was to be given by Msgr. John P. Cody, who is the chancellor of the Arch-

7) Depending on the presence of factors which are a violation of religious freedom. T. G.

diocese of St. Louis. The benediction was to be given by Rev. Theodore Schroeder of our church in Brentwood. Yielding to scruples expressed in the St. Louis County Pastoral Conference, Pastor Schroeder withdrew from the program. The assignment was then given to Dr. Caemmerer by the mayor's committee. The V-E Day proclamation asked the people of Saint Louis to go to their own churches for worship in the course of the day. The public program was held on the Plaza. There were addresses by the mayor and others. All the various contributions were greeted with applause. The Catholic priest stressed our thanks to the men who made the victory possible; Dr. Caemmerer stressed the significance of V-E Day as a reminder of undone tasks and the need for continued vitality of citizenship; "to the supply of that vitality and the gaining of the victories of peace as well as war, we, the churchmen whom I represent today, are pledged." The colored pastor pleaded for understanding and co-operation between groups in the days of peace. The rabbi pleaded for a spirit of forgiveness instead of vengeance toward the enemy. The Presbyterian president of the Church Federation stated that the great challenge of V-E Day was to prevent the recurrence, as far as possible, of further war. At the close Dr. Caemmerer announced that the sentiments and ideals of the day could best be summarized in words from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, which he then read in extract.

In this recital it is to be noted, first of all, that our stand has consistently been against city-sponsored *religious services* in which every denomination would have its part. When Pastor Kurth was invited by the mayor to advise regarding the proper form which a religious celebration should take, he said the mayor should follow the example of the President and Governors in regard to Thanksgiving Day; he should

urge all citizens to go to their own churches to give thanks to God. Furthermore, it has been made clear that we cannot participate in joint *religious services*. The case may be illustrated by what happened on V-J Day. On that occasion I substituted for Rev. Kurth on the mayor's committee, meeting August 14 to arrange a victory celebration for the city. I suggested a military celebration with bands and marching troops, speeches by civic leaders, American Legion, V. F. W., Chamber of Commerce, etc. The committee decided to arrange for eight minutes of prayers during the popular celebration on the Plaza. That evening Rabbi Isserman and a Negro preacher carried this out, while the Catholic priest and I did not attend. For the celebration on V-J Day a subcommittee was to arrange a religious observance. I directed attention to the undemocratic nature of a program which excluded twenty or thirty sects from participation and the religious differences which mark the participants, but I was overruled by the claim that the people of Saint Louis "wanted an emotional outlet to the religious sentiment," such as the service in church cannot give them. A religious union celebration in Forest Park was planned. Needless to state, we did not participate.

Not so long ago one of our pastors in Indianapolis was called upon to pronounce a prayer while the Governor of the State, a member of his congregation, was being inaugurated. During the same ceremony the Lieutenant Governor was inaugurated, and since he was a member of the Baptist Church, his Baptist pastor spoke a prayer. Those of us who advocate as a Scriptural principle the rule that all participation in a program to which religious elements have been contributed by those of another faith is sinful unionism, will condemn our pastor for taking part in this inauguration. I don't condemn him, and I hold that any such judgment passed on his action has no foundation in Scripture.

Summary

1. Prayer fellowship among Christians is a privilege and a duty.

2. The distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship must be upheld.

3. Joint prayer by which the truth is denied or the appearance of indifference to error is created constitutes sinful unionism and is an offense.

4. Prayer is not in itself a confessional act.

5. Cases of casuistry must be decided on the principles that the purpose of an organization or a meeting identifies it as permitting or not permitting joint prayer.

6. The principles underlying the chapter on unionism in the *Pastoral Theology* of John H. C. Fritz are Scriptural.

7. In the practice of the Missouri Synod the absolute prohibition of prayer with anyone not sharing our orthodox views in every respect is an innovation and has no parallels either in the practice of our Church during its formative years nor in the theology of Dr. Walther, Dr. Pieper, the older dogmaticians, the Lutheran Confessions, and Martin Luther.

Resolutions

adopted by the Visitors and Circuit Representatives of the Western District Sept. 25, 1945:

1. that the texts frequently adduced against opening meetings with the A. L. C. with prayer do not apply to the case;

2. that we concur in the action of the St. Louis Conference approving of the participation of Dr. Caemmerer in the V-E Day program;

3. that we ask Concordia Publishing House to publish the paper on prayer fellowship by Professor Graebner in order to make it available to other conferences.